

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks a Naturalization Ceremony for Active Duty Service Members
May 1, 2009

The President. Thank you. Thank you so much. This is a lot of fun. This makes so much of the hard work we do worth it, to see this ceremony here today. It is my honor and my personal pleasure to be the first to address you as my fellow Americans. And welcome to your White House. Now, I know this day carries a lot of meaning not only for you, but for your family members and your fellow service members who join you today.

Each of you has a unique story to tell about the journey that led you here. You hail from every corner of the Earth, from Southeast Asia to Central Europe, from West Africa to South America. Some of you came to this country as young children, because your parents wanted to give you a better life in the land of opportunity. Others traveled here as adults, enduring hardship and sacrifice to provide for your own families. But all of you have one thing in common: You're here because you have not merely chosen to live in this country, you've chosen to serve this country.

You're here for the same reason that Jeonathan Zapata is here. Jeonathan recently returned from serving as part of our efforts in Afghanistan. He actually helped man the 400,000th aircraft landing aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk*. And Jeonathan wanted to serve the country he considers his own, even though he was not yet a citizen, because America had been so good to him from the time he came here from Nicaragua as a child. "By serving in the military," Jeonathan says, "I can also give back to the U.S."

So, Jeonathan, I'd like you to stand.

You're here for the same reason—you can sit down now, Jeonathan—[*laughter*]. You're here for the same reason that Chryshann Pierre is here. Chryshann, where are you? There you are. Chryshann is an Army Specialist returning from service in Iraq late last year. Originally, she joined the military because she wanted to provide stability for her three children. But then she discovered something she did not expect: She loves being in the Army. [*Laughter*] In fact, she even said that she loved basic training. Chryshann, you've got to be pretty tough to love basic training. [*Laughter*]

You all have your own stories—you can sit down, Chryshann—[*applause*]. You all have your own stories of how you came to this country. And you all have your own personal reasons for why you joined the military. But in the service that you render, in the sacrifices that each of you have made and will continue to make, in the commitment you've shown to your adopted nation, you're part of a larger story, America's story.

For more than two centuries, this Nation has been a beacon of hope and opportunity, a place that has drawn enterprising men and women from around the world who have sought to build a life as good as their talents and their hard work would allow. And generation after generation of immigrants have come to these shores because they believe that in America all things are possible.

So you are not only living examples of that promise, you're also serving to defend that promise for future generations. And your service reminds all of us that much of the strength of this country is drawn from those who have chosen to call it home. It's not lost on me or

anybody here today that at a time when we face an economic crisis born in many ways of irresponsibility, there are those who are actively pursuing greater responsibility.

And one person here today who fits that description well enough is Jeanne Ebongue Tapo—right here. She grew up in a poor family in Gabon, Africa, the daughter of a single mother raising five children by herself. And Jeanne immigrated to the United States to provide for her family and to pursue her dream of becoming a dentist. And that's why she joined the Navy. And she hoped she'd have the opportunity to work and see the world and also earn her education.

And that's exactly what she has been able to do. She has started college; she's had the chance to travel. And even though she's had to make sacrifices to be apart from her loved ones, the people she's met in the Navy have become like a family away from home. And she's had the chance to be a part of what it feels like—what feels like a small community and, at the same time, to be part of something much larger than herself. So Jeanne, thank you.

Despite all the—all that she's faced, despite all the obstacles that she's overcome, Jeanne has made it her mission to serve others. "At the end of the day," she said, "the only thing that matters is that I helped."

As our newest Americans, all of you remind us just how precious our citizenship is, of how much it's worth and why it's worth protecting. You all remind us that citizenship is not just a collection of rights, it's also a set of responsibilities; that America's success is not a gift, it is hard won. It depends on each of us doing our part. So thank you all for your service. I am extraordinarily proud of you. And your Nation is grateful to you.

So now it is also my privilege to present a distinguished American with an award in recognition of the many contributions of naturalized citizens like all of you. It's called the Outstanding American by Choice award. It's given to—it's given by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and it is my honor to award it to Peter Lemon. And let me tell you a little bit about Peter. Peter was just 19 years old, and a citizen for just 7 years, when he and his platoon came under fire in the Tay Ninh Province of Vietnam.

Wounded by shrapnel from a mortar that exploded near his foxhole, Specialist Lemon kept fighting to protect his position against wave after wave of attack. The battle raged for hours. He was wounded a second time, and then a third. But he refused to give up, even leaving his foxhole and exposing himself to enemy fire in order to continue to defend his fellow Rangers.

In fact, once the fight was over, Specialist Lemon refused to be evacuated until others had been taken to a field hospital. And Pete would spend a month in the hospital himself to recover from his injuries. Soon after he returned home, he would be presented with the Medal of Honor by President Nixon.

Today, Peter Lemon is a proud father and a proud veteran, as well as an author and a filmmaker. And he has devoted his time and energies to talking about what his own experiences have meant to him and what he has learned, to encourage each and every one of us that the way to make the most of our talents is to make a difference in the lives of others.

Now, his experience is a testament to the men and women who have come to this country to build a better life for themselves and their families, and who have, by their commitment and contribution, made America a much better place as well.

So it is my honor to present this Outstanding American by Choice award to Peter Lemon. Peter, will you please come here?

[At this point, the President presented the award.]

The President. One of you might win this someday. You're already well on the way.

Are you going to lead the Pledge of Allegiance?

Mr. Lemon. Yes.

Would everybody please stand, and we're going to say the Pledge of Allegiance for our great Nation.

[Mr. Lemon then led a recital of the Pledge of Allegiance.]

The President. Thank you so much, Peter.

Thank you, everybody. With that, the ceremony comes to an end. We are extraordinarily grateful for our fellow citizens and all the service that they have rendered. Give them one more big round of applause.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:27 p.m. in the East Room at the White House.

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